Healing Touch

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Jacki Gethner didn't know a lot about HIV/AIDS when she completed her certification in massage therapy in 1988. But after learning her best friend, Bonnie Hamann, was HIV positive, Gethner wanted to use her healing touch to help improve the lives, minds and bodies of people affected by and living with HIV.

Her previous experience as a mental health counselor sparked a desire to use bodywork to relieve the stress of dealing with health conditions. "I wanted to reach out because the response [to people living with HIV] was so negative," she says. The chance to further her education and simultaneously offer support arrived in 1987 at the First Annual Holistic and Western Medicine AIDS Conference: AIDS, Medicine and Miracles.

Gethner offered her massage skills in exchange for a chance to attend the conference and learn about the virus. She encouraged other massage therapists to attend because she believed it was a great way to share accurate HIV/AIDS information with their communities. During the conference, Gethner also taught HIV-positive people and their families massage skills so they could improve each other's well-being.

"Teaching people allows them to have more control over their illness, and it helps with self-esteem," Gethner says, adding that it also helps them adhere to medication. "A lot of physical changes go on when someone becomes ill with HIV, so touch is a very nurturing thing."

Gethner has dedicated more than 20 years to supporting and educating people living with the virus about massage therapy. In November 2009, her work was recognized when she received the Kaiser Permanente HIV/AIDS Diversity Award for being a pioneer in treating HIV-positive people with complementary medicine.

She is using the award to continue the Women of a Certain Age program she cofounded with Sally Fisher, an AIDS activist, and Sharon Lund, PhD, who has been living with HIV for nearly 30 years. The program, based in Oregon, is for women ages 50 and older and offers peer education and outreach in community settings such as churches, garden groups and workplace sites. In addition to talking about condoms and HIV tests and prevention, volunteers provide referrals to local HIV care and services—certainly important information for women of any age.

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